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ROBERT NATHAN

THE WORK *of* ROBERT NATHAN

By

Louis Bromfield

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Bibliography

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IT IS AMAZING how few writers seem ever to resemble the things they write. You are likely to find that a man who writes heroic and romantic tales is a wizened, nearsighted little fellow with no chin and a trembling lip, or the lady who writes in a mincing nasty-nice style, devoting all her energies to mere arrangements of words, is a plain old maid who dresses atrociously and wears a pince-nez dangling from the end of her nose. The strangest things come from the strangest persons. But I have known one or two writers who looked like what they wrote. Certainly there are moments when George Moore's dank figure and yellow hair resembles nothing so much as the more sea-sick portions of Lewis Seymour. And Conrad had a wild look and a singular fantastic Satanic beauty and so resembled such tales as *Almayer's Folly* and *Nostromo*. Hugh Walpole resembles the solid roast beef which he writes. None could look like a minor

poet and write the ill-natured periods of Mr. Mencken.

But they are after all, few and far between—these men who look like their work. And of all of them I can think of none in whom the physical appearance of the man and spiritual character of the writing seem so closely allied as in the subject of whom I am writing. I suppose if one were to read *Jonah* and *Autumn* and *The Fiddler in Barly* and *The Woodcutter's House* without ever having seen their author and were then asked to make a picture of him, the result would be a very close likeness of Robert Nathan. At least to me it seems inevitable. The picture would of necessity be the portrait of a man who had above all else a pair of dark, fine eyes filled with understanding and fire, not the fire of a physical passion so much as of a deeper and more spiritual. They would of a necessity be eyes at once older and younger than the man himself, the eyes of one who came of an old and distinguished race, cursed by a too profound sensitiveness. They would be eyes of no age at all; in other words eyes of all time. The forehead should have to be high and rather square and intellectual, the nose aquiline and (here I am forced to use one of the most vulgar and vague and undescriptive words; but in this case it has a meaning)—a nose

aquiline and aristocratic, the chin finely cut and the lips an odd contradiction of austerity and love for life. It would be necessary of course to supply to the face an expression, and the dominant characteristic of the expression would of a certainty have to be one of sympathy. The shadow of mockery plays over it, but it is a kind warm mockery with none of the vicious acidity that casts a demoniac shadow across the face of a Swift or a Pope. It is the face of one who is amused at the idiocies of the human spectacle without becoming either enraged or bitter over them.

Robert Nathan looks like his books. He is a wise and gentle man. He is one of the best proofs that no man can escape his face.

Because his books are like him, they have had a singular reception as books go in this active, roaring, intensely human America. People have been puzzled by them, have found in them blasphemies and other nonsense, have been charmed by them and have waged war over them. They have had the same effect upon the army of reviewers and critics that a gentle man, more intelligent than most of his fellows, has upon a mob. It has been like that always, largely because most people are stupid and resent intelligence; and to this rule reviewers are by no means an exception. They are

very much like the mob save that their characteristics are, due to their constant and immediate access to pen and ink or typewriters, rather more visible and acute. It is possible to go through one's list of acquaintances and pick out almost to a certainty those who understand what Robert Nathan is writing about.

He is unique among American writers, a warm, serene, aloof and pleasing figure in a scene whose greatest attraction is the chaotic, stirring activity of a battle picture. He has never become embroiled, either as a person or as a writer, in the tiresome cliques and feuds of contemporary American writing. He is much too old and knowing for that. I suspect that in the recesses of some deep tribal consciousness he has passed through all such things long ago. To him it must seem amusing, childish and trivial. He is, I think, concerned entirely with the beauty and penetration of the thing upon which he is at the moment concentrating his whole soul. And the result is a fine, sensitive, beautiful, simple thing, as clear as spring water and as clean. His writing has the simplicity and clarity which comes only of concentration at a white heat and of an immense concern over each word and phrase.

He is not a "fine" writer. He is a fine writer without the quotation marks. He is not inclined to

write simply for the sake of doing tricks with words, filling whole pages with fantastic feats of jugglery that conceal a gaping emptiness just beneath. In reading his books you are not slapped in the face constantly by the consciousness that he has just pulled his thumb from the pie crying out, "Look what a trick writer am I!" On the contrary it is genuinely fine prose which flows past like a deep tranquil stream. And always there comes from its depths the fine warm glow of meaning after meaning. It is as if each word were a little ship laden with precious treasure. It is a quality which grows, I think, with each succeeding book.

I know how he writes. It is with the sparing skill and intensity of a worker in intaglio. He has been known to spend days of effort in the creation of a single luminous page.

* * * * *

He is not a writer for the stupid or the bigoted. He has learned perhaps before he was born that rule of life which Anatole France put into words— that same homely, wise Anatole France at whom the Parisian window trimmers of the Cocteau School have taken of late to shying empty scent bottles— "Happier are those who have surveyed things from every side, who have seen them under multiple aspects and full of contrasts. These have

come close enough to truth to realize that they shall never reach it. They doubt and become benevolent and gracious; they doubt and they have strength and sweetness, liberty and independence; they doubt and they become the moderators and good counsellors of this poor humanity which is so enslaved to certainty and which does not know how to doubt."

This is the profound and gentle philosophy which lies in each book that Mr. Nathan writes. I have seen his effect upon the stupid and the bigoted. I think the height of stupidity and nonsense was attained by a reviewer writing in perhaps the greatest of our American newspapers. He or she (it sounded rather like one of our infallible American literary ladies) wrote, "No need to elaborate the gratuitous blasphemy of God's argument with Jonah or the arid sophistication of God's apologetic explanation to the whale." You will not find in any Nathan book this same implication of vulgar and pitiful certainty. He is too wise for such fatuous sureness of what is blasphemy and what isn't. Indeed I fancy that the philosophy of *The Fiddler in Barly* is in its complete simplicity as near to the whole essence of the Christian philosophy at its source as that contained in any book

written since Paul of Tarsus invented the curse of theological interpretation.

I do not want it thought from this that there is anything mournful and pious about the books of Mr. Nathan. There is, it is true, a gentle agreeable melancholy such as must accumulate and at length infuse the writing of any one interested in the human spectacle; but there is as well a delightful, half-pagan humor that plays through each book like spots of sunlight filtering through the moving leaves of a tree. It is a humor very close to nature, penetrating far beneath all the hard little laws of morality and what-not which man has superimposed upon nature to protect himself from himself. It goes down and down into the roots of things. There is the incident of the bull cricket in *The Fiddler in Barly* and the conversation between Musket, the dancing dog, and the mouse who in *The Woodcutter's House* was contemplating matrimony with a lady mouse whose past had not been all it might have been. The scene takes place in the stable where Musket and Isaiah, the stoic horse, are deep in a philosophical discussion.

"Suddenly a mouse ran out of the hole and gave him (Musket) a sharp bite on the leg, at the same time exclaiming, 'Excuse me! I took this means of attracting your attention.'

"With a polite look the mouse added, 'I am engaged to be married. However my thoughts are all at sea. Marriage is not what it used to be; I do not know my way about any more. What do you think? You have had so much experience.'

" 'Not,' said Musket thoughtfully, 'with marriage. But it is true that I have thought a great deal about such matters. What is it you would like to know, my friend? However, first tell me: is this a marriage of convenience or the result of passion?'

" 'Alas,' said the mouse, 'I do not know.' His voice sank. 'My fiancée,' he murmured, 'is not a virgin. She has already been unfaithful to a number of my friends. Nevertheless to be near her fills me with rapture. But I am obliged to admit, it will be more convenient for her than for me.'

". . . Musket looked down at him with a superior expression. 'Well, tell me,' he said, 'why do you wish to marry her?'

" 'Because,' said the mouse, 'she wishes to settle down in a respectable way. She says she knows what she knows, and that life is not all what-you-may-call-it. As for me—God help me; I love her.'

"Musket replied musingly, 'She has had experience; and she believes that life is not all what-you-may-call-it. She would make you an excellent wife,

my friend. As for what she knows, that would only make her more intelligent. For one thing, she has learned that vigor without wit is of no use to her. I congratulate you.'

" 'You mean,' said the mouse dizzily, 'that it is I who am the fortunate one? You think then, that I should go on with this?'

" 'At once,' said Musket. 'Before the lady who believes that life is not all what-you-may-call-it, changes her mind. Marry her, my friend, but do not believe her. Enjoy yourself as much as though you were not married at all.'

" 'Thank you,' said the mouse. 'This is very helpful.' And he ran off through the grass in a dazzled way. Musket heard him calling, 'Elizabeth, I have something to say to you.'

"Isaiah (the horse), who had been listening to this conversation, exclaimed sternly:

" 'Musket, you are a scoundrel.'

" 'Isaiah,' replied Musket firmly, 'you are going at it from the wrong end. I am not a scoundrel; I am simply on the side of the wife. Well, look here; she expects love to be lofty. She is married and her virtuous husband attacks her with appetite and embarrassment. By the time he is ready to go to sleep, she is sunk in despair. Phoo, that is a ridiculous thing. That is because there is some attempt

to be pure. If it were a sin, they would enjoy themselves.

" 'Women should sin a little before they are married, for the joy and the experience.'

" 'No,' said Isaiah, 'you are a scoundrel, that is all there is to it.'

"Musket shrugged his shoulders. 'After all,' he said, 'you have spent your life on a hill. And much of it has been, as you say, devoted to perspiration. I have not been a dancer for nothing; I know what I know. It is the woman who is not ashamed of love. Left to herself, she would make a heaven out of such things. Unfortunately she has been kept in the background.'

" 'That is the place for her,' declared Isaiah.

"He added uneasily. 'I do not like this sort of talk, it makes me very uncomfortable.' And he looked around, to see if there were any females within hearing."

It is an entertaining passage, fairly typical of what one can find almost anywhere in Mr. Nathan's work. On the surface there is wit and a sly humor and a simple limpid style of writing. And underneath how much more is there—of truth, of honesty, of understanding. The roots of this conversation go down and down into the roots of existence that lie far below the shallow surface of

manners and hypocrisy. Suddenly Isaiah became a comical symbol of most American men and almost all American husbands. All their timidity and nonsense, their hypocrisy, and their tragic misunderstanding of the character of women lies in the brain of Isaiah "who looked around to see if there were any females within hearing." I can see Isaiah sitting in his club or in a pullman smoking-car telling dirty stories to a whole circle of smirking horses.

Every now and then some earnest person collects statistics upon the scandal of divorce in America, probing about in dusty columns of figures for the real reason why an overwhelming percentage of suits are brought by women. And in the end the prodding ends in confusion. I fancy that the answer lies largely in the quiet conversation between Musket, Isaiah and the mouse.

For truth may be found in the heart of a philosopher but seldom in the figures of a statistician; it is far too delicate a thing to be pinned down to columns of numbers on ruled paper.

* * * * *

As is the case with any thoroughly good and distinguished writer it is impossible to put one's finger on any book of Mr. Nathan's and say, "This is by far the best." Each one has its individually admirable qualities. I do think it possible to say that

each successive book has shown a certain advance and ripening of a talent which in the beginning produced far finer things than most writers, and more especially writers in the field of fantasy, ever produce at the peak. I admit a partiality to *Jonah* which is a middle book, but that is perhaps because I find a capricious pleasure in reading of the absurd and frequently comical goings-on of the Jews in the Old Testament. I am convinced that most of those who hold the Old Testament as an inspired and sacred book, have never read it and are unfamiliar with the tricks that were practised in it and of the human charm of such a figure as Sarah who embarrassed her husband horribly by laughing when she overheard the angels announcing to him that she was to have a child after she had passed her hundredth birthday. (I should like to read Mr. Nathan's version of this tale.) I am certain that the reviewer who found the conversation blasphemous between God and Jonah knew nothing of the peculiar quality of the Old Testament Jews and their God. *Jonah* has always been to me a delightful, honest and human book.

But most of all, I like *The Woodcutter's House*. Not only does it possess the same qualities of irony, beauty and humor that one finds in all the other Nathan books—it reveals a singular under-

standing of and love for the whole spectacle of nature, the love of Uncle Henry for his lettuces and the love for their size which in the end came near to working ruin for all those who loved Old Hemlock and the ash trees that grew there. And there is the curious pagan love of Joseph the Woodcutter for these same trees. I think I like best of all the figure of the Little Green Man who became so friendly with the elfin Metabel and transported her in so miraculous a fashion back to Barly.

It is, as a tale, a singular compound of reality and unreality. All of Mr. Nathan's books are this, but *The Woodcutter's House* marks the happiest union of these qualities. And it is a union that is not accomplished by great effort and concentration on the part of the author. You go on and on reading it, without once stopping to think that mice and dogs do not hold philosophical conversations on love. It transports you miraculously into a world in which such things are as commonplace as three meals a day; and it works this magic because the author himself must surely believe in it. You have the feeling that for Mr. Nathan the world is like that. I suspect that he has sometimes listened to such conversations, hearing things which are to the rest of us inaudible. I think that at times some of us approach this capacity for understanding near

enough to make us know that such things are not impossible. I myself have known dogs and horses so friendly that I am certain they have often addressed each other in a language that is beyond our understanding. I have known old dogs like Musket who, if they could not speak English, could certainly hold long conversations with you in a language that was perhaps more clear than any grouping of unsatisfactory, fly-by-night words.

Mr. Nathan is also a poet, which every one who knows anything of American poetry knows well enough. I shall not touch upon the beauties of his verse, because I fear that the result would only be a kind of mauling of sensibilities which are beyond me. I only know that for me his verse possesses that same iridescent beauty and understanding which illumines all that he has written.

His books are not ones to be read between Peoria and Kankakee and then thrown from the train window into the nearest cornfield. They are, on the contrary, books to be read and tucked back carefully into the traveling bag to be read again a year or two later perhaps in the quiet of a library where there is a fire blazing or perhaps by the light of a night lamp. There are no books in the world so pleasant to read just before turning in, for they have a quality between dreams and reality and

help to bridge that chasm between the hard realities of the day and the superb unrealities of the night.

If you have not read Robert Nathan, I urge you to read him and if you have read one book I urge you, probably needlessly, to read all the others. There is a quality in him that is sadly lacking in American letters. We have plenty of vigor, of originality, of imagination, of capacity for setting words on paper but we have precious little of understanding, of that quality which belongs to a man of the world, a civilized creature, who knows that the world and the human race are thus and so and that reforming is nonsense. He knows that life is a grand spectacle—warm and cruel, tragic and beautiful, idiotic and splendid. I urge you to read the books of Robert Nathan.

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Distinguished Critical Opinion

of

THE WOODCUTTER'S HOUSE

Robert Nathan's THE WOODCUTTER'S HOUSE is certainly the most charming, beautiful, and mature snatch of fantasy that I have come across in years. Amid the rush and fury of contemporary writing the book is rather like the song of a thrush beneath the Sixth Avenue "L," or the sight of a butterfly in a subway station. Had I not read it with my own eyes I would not have believed that so deft and delicate and perfect a work could have been produced in our land in this day.

—LEWIS BROWNE.

The delicacy of THE WOODCUTTER'S HOUSE is flexible and lovely like a web stretched between trembling leaves. Mr. Nathan blows books like bubbles filled only with the light smoke of an emotion through a pipe so fragile that even the pressure of corn-silk would break its narrow bowl.

—*Time.*

To come upon THE WOODCUTTER'S HOUSE is to come upon a new world. It is a different thing. And those who want that, or a genuine manifestation of it, will speedily come to this book. Metabel dreaming her way up to the "magic mountain" of Hemlock—her dream's end, Musket, the dog with the loquacious tongue, Uncle Henry, driven to philosophy by his big heads of lettuce, Joseph, the contented dreamer whom the so practical Prissy would have do more than dream—such characters as these can not be explained away; they have to be met and understood and accepted in their own delightful world—and to the author's great credit they are—completely.

—E. G. WOOD of *The New Republic.*

Distinguished Opinion

The Woodcutter's House is completely captivating. It's precisely the kind of book I love to curl up in a chair with when the house is still. It's full of an elusive humor—grotesque and tender. Why don't we get more such books?

—Martha Ostenso.

One line of Robert Nathan's is worth two ordinary novels. My opinion of The Woodcutter's House is simply an amplification of that theme. The book is perfect.

—Elmer Davis.

There should be some word to describe the kind of book this is, but that word does not now exist so far as I know. The Woodcutter's House has a flavor to its charm. It is a joyous tale, a fantastic, gay and lovely tale!

—*The Chicago Daily Tribune.*

Magic as I found that mountain, Hemlock, the warmest spot is reserved for Musket. There's a dog! The scene between Musket and the mouse, in which they discuss marriage is just about perfect! I think Mr. Nathan writes as beautiful prose as I've read in a long time.

—Sidney Herschel Small.

I like The Woodcutter's House the best of all of Robert Nathan's books and that is praise indeed. His prose is like a clear, cool, quiet stream moving surely to its destination.

—Richard Hale.

I have just come out from under the spell of The Woodcutter's House. The mood here created by this mood-master seems too elfin to estimate—serious sensitive whimsy, pastel in its whispered utterance, detached as nowhere yet trembling on the edge of infinity. It is the book of a prose Debussy.

—Paul Wilstach.

Distinguished Opinion

Robert Nathan's gift is individual; he combines tender fantasy with delicate irony, and his prose is as lovely as any I know about in contemporary writing. There is much gentle and mellow wisdom in The Woodcutter's House in addition to its qualities as a story and its unflawed beauty.

—Herschel Brickell in *The New York Evening Post.*

I read The Woodcutter's House through at a sitting and liked it very much, especially that bit about the mouse. I think Mr. Nathan writes in a very distinguished style, especially when he writes drily.

—Sylvia Townsend Warner.

There are novels for temperaments, and Robert Nathan's The Woodcutter's House is one of them. If you like something simple and basic, through which prose lilts like poetry, Mr. Nathan's novel will delight you.

—*Louisville Courier-Journal.*

When one encounters fantasy and philosophy, wisdom and waggery, all in the same volume, a rare entry can be made in the diary of happy discoveries. The Woodcutter's House is a crafty piece of writing, a shrewd and multi-versed testament that assuredly confers on its author the right to be called "the gentlest philosopher."

—Henry Morton Robinson in *The Commonweal.*

The Woodcutter's House is elusive of categorical placement or plot synopsis. Mr. Nathan's story gives one a catch in the throat as one reads it. Those who care for something out of the ordinary, undefinable, but unforgettable, will find here a book to cherish.

—*The New York Sun.*

The Woodcutter's House is told quietly, with dreamy kindliness, with just enough of wistfulness to make it fragrantly charming.

—*Toledo Blade.*

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Distinguished Opinion

The Woodcutter's House is exquisite. I read it at a sitting and was charmed from the first page to the last one. Nowhere have I found such beauty.

—Nevil Henshaw.

The Woodcutter's House leaves us with a new sense of trees, rain, sunlight, and the hills.

—*Rochester Democrat Chronicle.*

Robert Nathan is at heart a poet but one whose poetic spirit finds far more effective expression in his prose than in his verse. The Woodcutter's House is quiet, gentle rather than aggressive, moving at a soothingly leisurely pace, and full of elflike grace. It captures and touches our hearts in the manner of dear familiar things long forgotten and suddenly rediscovered.

—Edwin Bjorkman in *Asheville Times.*

Here is a strangely beautiful tale which it would be hard to classify. There are times when you feel that you are reading poetry, and times when it comes very near romance. And the strange thing is that you do not want to classify it. You are content to read on and on, in this tale of how Metabel went over Hemlock and how she came back again.

—*Morgantown Post.*

It took a big man to write The Woodcutter's House, a man with humor, and grand simplicity, and tolerance for large things and small things, and eyes that see people and trees and the sun beautifully. A man who knows color, and dancing, and how they come into a life, and a man who knows what talks inside of one, whether one say it or not. A man who knows what happens when one has a big joy in one's heart, or a big sorrow—one who understands the need of loving and being loved, and the singing gladness of the heart and the dancing of the being that goes with it, and the sorrow-just-waiting that goes with it, also.

—*Chicago Post.*

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